Lead Found At SC Asphalt Plant Site

Meg Kinnard, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina health and environmental officials said Tuesday they have alerted federal authorities after finding elevated levels of arsenic and lead at a Columbia asphalt plant site.

Department of Health and Environmental Control director Catherine Templeton told The Associated Press on Tuesday that inspectors made the discovery last week at property operated by SEACO Inc. The asphalt emulsion manufacturing company has done business in the Carolinas, Florida and Virginia since 1949.

Arsenic was first found in soil and groundwater at the site in May, when more testing was done as SEACO prepared to be acquired by Associated Asphalt Inc., a regional building materials company from Roanoke, Va., according to DHEC. According to a letter sent to the agency last month, that acquisition took place June 1.

Finding it unusual that arsenic would be at an asphalt site, DHEC officials say they learned that a fertilizer plant had operated on the same land in the early 1900s. Further soil sampling turned up the lead, Templeton said. She gave no immediate details on the levels of the contaminants found.

"That's a big deal," she said.

According to the EPA, ingesting too much arsenic can lead to skin damage, circulatory issues and increased risks of cancer. Lead consumption, per the agency, can cause physical and mental developmental delays, kidney problems and high blood pressure.

Members of the nearby Rosewood neighborhood have hired Columbia attorney Dick Harpootlian to represent their interests, and DHEC says a public meeting will be held next month. A local high school has several sports facilities in the area, and an urban farm is within one mile of the plant.

It was immediately clear how many people live in the footprint of the old fertilizer plant. Templeton said officials would be notifying residents later this week and asking for permission to test their soil for contaminants.

"We want to start knocking on the doors of the residents who live in the footprint of the former fertilizer plant to see if we need to test their soil," Templeton said.

Officials at SEACO did not immediately return messages Tuesday.

Sam Cannon, vice president of operations for Associated Asphalt, said in an email that his company discovered arsenic at the plant in May and promptly notified

DHEC regulators. Cannon said neither arsenic nor lead are used in the production of asphalt, nor are they a byproduct of the production process.

"Being a good corporate citizen has been a core value of our company since 1948 and we are committed to being a good neighbor to the residents of the Rosewood Community," Cannon said.

DHEC first began investigating pollution concerns at the site in the 1990s after a complaint about an asphalt spill, according to the agency. At the time, DHEC says it found petroleum compounds in soil samples and asked SEACO to test the area's groundwater.

After finding petroleum in the groundwater as well, DHEC made the company install monitoring wells and submit a petroleum cleanup plan. A storage tank and contaminated soil were removed, and officials say those contaminants had fallen to safe levels by 1997.

Commending Templeton for her assertiveness in pursuing the lead and arsenic issues, Harpootlian said the repercussions of the lead discovery could be tragic if the contaminant is found in the Congaree River, which is a major recreational venue near Columbia.

"This is horrible," Harpootlian said. "If arsenic and lead got in that water, the mounting devastation would be huge."

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